

Ronald McDonald House

I'm sure you've heard of the Ronald McDonald House charity. They provide housing for families of sick kids when they're in the hospital. Seems pretty innocent, right?

Well, there's another side to the charity. There's another type of Ronald McDonald House, one that not many people know about.

There's one in most big cities. You won't find it by looking for it. It doesn't have an address. It doesn't have a sign above the door. It doesn't even have windows.

No, the only way you'll find it, is if you're taken there.

That's how I found it.

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I've never met my real parents. I've been in and out of foster families and group homes here in Detroit since I was a kid. I'm 15 now, and I'm what they refer to as a BAD KID.

Always causing trouble, always getting thrown out and placed with another unsuspecting do-gooder who thinks they can help me. I always prove them wrong.

My caseworker sat across the black metal table, looking weary and frazzled. On the table between us was a thick letter-sized brown envelope; my case file.

"Well, your reputation has preceded you," she said. "And now you only have two options; military school in Lansing, or the Ronald McDonald house, which has miraculously cleared you for acceptance."

I don't have the patience for drill sergeants and 5 AM reveille. And how bad could a halfway house named after a fast food clown possibly be? Ronald McDonald House, it was.

Dark clouds loomed above me the day I climbed into the back of my caseworker's town car. My few belongings in a backpack and the clothes on my back; that's all I could take. One of the few belongings I had was a photo album, filled with pictures of all the foster families I had been with. It was nice to remember some of them, even though I had royally fucked it up each time.

"I've had a few cases who went through the Ronald McDonald House," the caseworker said from the front seat. "Things went so well for those kids, I never had to transfer them anywhere else. In fact, the House took over their case files and everything."

We drove into downtown Detroit, past all the familiar landmarks. I had been thrown out of one foster home just outside town because I snuck into downtown Detroit with some neighbor kids to sneak into a dive bar. Good times.

"Well, here we are." The car came to a stop.

I looked out the window. We had parked in front of a tall, gray, windowless building, sandwiched between two other industrial buildings on a narrow city street. I noticed there was an address on the building to my left, and one on the right, but none on this particular building. Not even a sign.

"Are you sure?" I asked, hesitating as I opened the car door and climbed out of the back seat. I slung my backpack over my shoulder, clinging tightly to the strap, and followed the caseworker up to the windowless metal doors. She pressed a buzzer and spoke to someone inside, and the doors clicked to unlock. We walked in.

As soon as the metal doors closed behind us, I noticed the pin-drop silence. It was that sort of silence that is so oppressive and empty it almost deafens you.

Across the dimly lit lobby, there was a glass window with someone inside. A secretary. She was turned away, typing something intently. We walked over to the window. The caseworker rang a bell on the counter, and the secretary spun around in her chair.

Her face was painted like a clown.

Like Ronald McDonald, in fact.

She even had the short, curly red hair. Otherwise, she wore a typical white nurse's dress.

I wanted to laugh at how bizarre it was, but I couldn't. A chill swept down my spine. Something was not right. I watched as the nurse and my caseworker interacted; paperwork was passed through the window. The caseworker slid my case file under the glass, as the nurse slid her some papers to sign.

As my caseworker signed the papers, the nurse looked at me. Her smile should have been warm and welcoming....but all I saw in her eyes was hunger.

"I can't stay here," I stammered loudly. "Take me to the military school in Lansing. PLEASE."

"What's the matter sweetie?" The nurse asked, her voice muffled slightly by the glass. "Afraid of clowns?"

I looked into her hungry eyes. Now there was a malicious glint as she laughed. My caseworker laughed too, obviously, and said, "Now now. Don't overreact! You'd hate the military school. Besides, this will be good for you!"

"Yes," said the clown nurse, "this will be good for you."

Before I could object, I heard a SLAM behind me.

I spun around to see an open door in the far corner of the lobby, to the left of the front desk window. There was no one there, just the light that flooded in from the door.

Then the creeping shadows. Shrill, echoing laughter and growing shadows along the wall inside the door.

"Oh!" said the caseworker, "Here comes the welcome committee!"

As I stared in horror, clutching the strap of my backpack, my caseworker patted me on the shoulder for the last time. "Don't worry honey. It'll be different this time. You'll feel right at home here, I promise!"

She turned to leave. I felt bile churning in my stomach.

"No!" I said desperately. "You can't leave me here!"

"Oh no, I've got to get going. I never did like clowns!"

And with that, she left me there. The metal doors slammed behind her, and I was alone.

I faced the open doorway by the front desk again. The shadows had almost entered the room and the piercing laughter was filling the lobby with sound.

I ran for the front doors. Pounded and yanked and pushed and screamed. Screamed for help, screamed for my caseworker, screamed for ANYONE, PLEASE GOD.

I turned to see the nurse behind the glass smiling at me again.

And then, they entered, laughing all the while.

A whole group of laughing nurses with clown faces and red hair. Some male, some female, but all with the same terrifying Ronald McDonald makeup. And in the dim light of the lobby, I could see the glint of metal tools in their hands. Coming up the rear was a pair of clown nurses rolling a metal table, complete with restraints.

"Get the fuck away from me!" I screamed. I pounded at the metal doors again. "Let me out of here!!"

They surrounded me. Grabbing me as I thrashed and screamed and tried to tear myself away. Laughing as I kicked and squirmed. They slammed me onto the rolling table and strapped me down.

I looked around wildly. I was surrounded.

"LET ME GO!!!" I screamed, twisting and turning and pulling at the restraints.

They rolled me through the open doorway and down a seemingly endless white hallway. They laughed and laughed and laughed. They waved their shiny scalpels and razors and needles mere inches from my face, just to make me flinch and scream. This made them laugh even harder.

The last thing I remember, before one of them finally injected me, was the hands. Gloved fingers prodding inside my mouth and pulling at the sides of my mouth, distorting my screams and forcing an unnatural grin onto my tear-streaked, sweaty face. Hot, rancid breath in my face. And the whispered, perverted voice speaking the words, "We love to see you smile!"

Then, as the maniacal laughter seemed to warp and wind down like a dying record player, everything faded to black.

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I opened my eyes, and I was blinded by bright lights above. Shielding my groggy eyes from the fluorescent bulbs, I turned on my side and looked around.

A cell. Tall white walls, covered in scratch marks and stains. A small drain in the corner of the floor; my toilet perhaps. A door with no windows. And on the floor by the door, my backpack.

I tried to sit up. My body ached and the moment I sat upright, my vision started spinning. Wonder what they drugged me with.

I realized I was shivering. I looked down. I wasn't wearing my own clothes anymore. I was wearing a dirty, ripped hospital gown, bright yellow with a pattern of Ronald McDonald heads all over. Nothing underneath.

I heard faint, muffled sounds from somewhere in the building. It sounded like screams.

I tried to stand, but couldn't keep my balance. My vision was beginning to stabilize, but my body still felt like rubber. I sank to my knees and crawled over to my backpack.

Before I got there, I tried to open the door. As expected, it was locked.

I slumped onto the floor beside my backpack and unzipped it.

All that remained inside was the photo album. They had taken my notebooks and pens and my cell phone. Of course they did.

I wearily opened the photo album. But instead of the photos that had been in there.... photos of myself with my previous foster families, photos where I had attempted to look happy and hopeful even though I knew I wouldn't be there for long..... instead of those photos..... they were like crime scene photos. And in each one, I recognized one of my former foster families, brutally murdered and covered in blood.

My heart raced and my stomach churned. I began to turn the pages quicker. Each page, a new photo, a new family, new carnage. I recognized their faces and the inside of their homes. I had lived with all these people. And now they were all dead.

I came to the last few pages. A photo of a house at night. Then a window of that house. Then inside the house, a dark hallway with light coming from one doorway. Then, a photo of my caseworker, brushing her teeth at her bathroom mirror. Then a photo of her looking at the camera in horror. Then a photo of the caseworker, naked, covered in her own blood, contorted into an unnatural position in her bathtub.

I turned to the last page. Written inside the back cover of the photo album were three words.

YOU
NEVER
EXISTED

I felt bile rising in my stomach. I threw the book to the ground and crawled over to the hole in the floor, and vomited.

They were right. Having killed everyone who ever knew me, it was as though I never existed.

I heard more faint screaming in the distance. I knew I had to get out.

I wiped the vomit off my face with my hospital gown and crawled back over to my backpack. Hopefully they hadn't found my secret weapon. I unzipped the front pocket and reached down into the very bottom, my fingers scraping the fabric. Sure enough, there they were, flush with the seams in the bag, nearly undetectable. The pins I used for picking locks. I told you, I'm a bad kid.

I leaned against the door and listened. I could hear footsteps approaching. But just as soon as they had come, they faded in the other direction. I knew I had to work fast. I jiggled the handle with one hand and picked the lock with the other hand. It was surprisingly simple.

Holding the handle, I slowly pulled myself to my feet. I could maintain my balance now. I pulled the door open just a crack.

A clown nurse darted past. My heart almost stopped. But his footsteps didn't slow or change and soon faded; he didn't notice me.

I poked my head out the door. Seemingly endless white hallways in either direction. The distant screams were louder now, coming from all around.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped into the hallway and closed the door behind me. I decided to go to the right. Passing doors, identical to the door I had been behind, I heard the screams and sobbing coming from behind each one. I stopped for a moment at one door. I heard the crying of a child inside. I jiggled the handle to see if I could let him out. Locked.

I kept moving, looking behind me every few seconds to make sure no nurses had come into the hallway. Then I passed a set of white double doors. I stopped for a moment.

The word PLAYPLACE was written in tall, thin letters across the width of both doors. I heard more screaming coming from within, the screams of multiple people. And laughter. The insane, shrill laughter of the clown nurses. I shuddered. I was afraid to find out what sort of torture was happening inside. And I knew I had to keep moving.

I saw a door ahead with a stairway symbol. I headed for it.

As I opened the door, I glanced behind me and saw two clown nurses emerging from the PlayPlace room. Their white nurse outfits were covered in streaks of blood. I quickly shut myself into the stairwell, hoping they hadn't noticed me.

The stairwell was dimly lit, with cement walls and rusty railings. I looked behind at the door I had just closed. There was a red number 5 on the door; so I must be on the 5th floor. I decided I had to get to the ground level.

Each footstep echoed as I began to descend the stairs. I couldn't hear the screaming anymore; just a low, deep humming sound, like pipes in the walls. It was a welcome respite.

I finally came to the door numbered 1. The staircase seemed to descend a few floors lower, but I stopped here and slowly peeked through the door. More white hallways. No clown nurses to be seen. So far, so good.

I stepped through the door and walked into the hallway. I noticed I couldn't hear any screaming on this floor. Just the buzz of the fluorescent tube lights above.

I came to the end of the hallway and another set of double doors. A large red cross--the kind you'd see on a lifeguard stand or a first aid kit--was painted across the width of the doors. I pressed my ear to the door. All I heard was a slow, rhythmic pulse like a machine at work. And, faintly, a beeping sound.... like you'd hear in a hospital room.

I knew I shouldn't open the door. I knew this wasn't the exit, I knew I should keep looking.

But I had to see.

I turned the handle. It wasn't locked. I peeked inside.

It was a cavernous white room. Fluorescent lights flickered and buzzed. I saw wires hanging all around.....

And... hanging from the ceiling, in rows.....

Kids. Kids in hospital gowns like mine, attached to white wooden crosses affixed to the ceiling. Literally crucified.

They were silent. Their heads drooping forward, their eyes either closed or staring at nothing. Some seemed to twitch a bit but most were still. Their crosses swung back and forth very slightly.

And the hanging wires... they weren't wires. They were intravenous tubes attached to the kids' wrists. Tubes sucking out their blood.

I almost vomited again right then and there.

In the very center of the room, amidst the rows of hanging crosses, I could see where the rhythmic pulsing sound came from. A huge steel cylinder, which seemed to be collecting the blood from all of the tangled tubes that dangled from the kids' wrists.

I opened my mouth to.... to scream? To cry out in anger?

All I could say was, "What the fuck?"

That's when the alarms began to sound. Loud, piercing, like the police sirens of hell. They must have realized I was missing.

I shut the doors and frantically glanced around the hallway to see if anyone was coming. No signs yet. I ran for the stairwell.

As soon as I entered the stairwell, I heard laughter from above. Echoing and reverberating throughout the stairwell. The clown nurses were coming.

I stumbled down the stairs as fast I could. I must have gone down another three stories before I reached the basement. I found myself running through a dark, sewer-like hallway, with small light bulbs

overhead every 10 yards or so. The smell of decay and rotting flesh grew more and more pungent as I ran.

The laughter continued behind me. I managed to glance behind and see a group of them running after me. I saw them come into the light and then become silhouettes again, their smiling faces and gleaming knives and needles pushing my adrenaline to the max. I ran past alcoves full of stacked, rotting corpses. But I couldn't stop. I couldn't think of anything but escape.

I turned a corner and found myself facing the metal rungs of a ladder in the wall. I climbed until my head smacked the ceiling.

Below me, the shadows and laughter grew closer. Their footsteps slowed. They were close and they knew it.

I pushed at the ceiling above me, heaving upward and panting and screaming. The clowns were below me, laughing and waving their scalpels. Something cut my leg. I screamed and pushed one last time--

The ceiling gave way as a manhole cover slammed onto asphalt above. A circular opening. I climbed out and frantically pushed the manhole cover back over the hole, blocking out the laughter of the clown nurses below.

I laid there on top of the manhole cover for a few minutes as I caught my breath. Rain fell onto my skin. The turbulent night sky above was a welcome sight.

I looked around. Abandoned buildings, broken glass. No lights. No cars. No signs of any life at all.

A police siren somewhere in the distance. Then, silence.

I climbed to my feet. Pain shot through my leg. I looked down and saw the cut on my ankle where a clown nurse had slashed me. Bastards.

Limping the best I could, I started to walk.

"Hello?" I called out. The only answer was a distant roll of thunder. "Somebody HELP ME PLEASE!!!"

My foot fell on something soft and mushy. I looked down. A newspaper. I peeled it off the wet asphalt. Most of the ink had faded, but I was able to make out the date: July, 13, 1992.

I dropped it, an icy dread filling my stomach. I kept walking.

"CAN ANYONE HEAR ME?!" I screamed. "PLEASE!!! Anyone..... please...."

My words faded into delirious sobs. I stood still for a moment. The rain had soaked through my thin hospital gown. I shivered as the wind blew.

Then, I saw a light in the distance. It was a big, yellow "M" in the sky. A McDonald's. Of course. I limped toward it.

When I came to the McDonald's, I saw that apart from the M, the rest of the building was completely dark. I walked cautiously toward the broken windows and looked in. Darkness.

I turned and surveyed the PlayPlace outdoor playground. Ten foot tall structures of colored tubes for kids to crawl through. Sitting at one of the benches was a familiar figure. The Ronald McDonald statue. You know, the one where you could sit beside him and it looks like he's got his arm around your shoulders. Every kid has seen it.

I shuddered at the sight.

The doors were unlocked. I walked in, out of the rain. Silence. Darkness.

I noticed that the decor wasn't like the modern McDonalds' you see. It was still the same as it was in the 80's, with the white plastic booths and the red and yellow tiles. The wind seemed to whisper through the broken windows.

I noticed something on the front counter. A black rectangle. I got closer. A laptop. A nearly new laptop. I let out a soft, delirious laugh. I knew what I was supposed to do.

So I took the laptop outside and sat beside the Ronald statue. I opened the laptop and began to type this story. The rain is falling on the keys but I don't care. There's nothing left to do now but wait.

Because I've been noticing, out of the corner of my eye.... Ronald is trying to look over my shoulder.

He's laughing now.

All I can do is join him.